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The Long Weekend: Life In The English Country House, 1918-1939



Synopsis

As WWI drew to a close, change reverberated through the halls of England's country homes. As the sun set slowly on the British Empire, the shadows lengthened on the lawns of a thousand stately homes. In *The Long Weekend*, historian Adrian Tinniswood introduces us to the tumultuous, scandalous and glamorous history of English country houses during the years between World Wars. As estate taxes and other challenges forced many of these venerable houses onto the market, new sectors of British and American society were seduced by the dream of owning a home in the English countryside. Drawing on thousands of memoirs, letters, and diaries, as well as the eye-witness testimonies of belted earls and bibulous butlers, Tinniswood brings the stately homes of England to life as never before, opening the door to a world by turns opulent and ordinary, noble and vicious, and forever wrapped in myth. We are drawn into the intrigues of legendary families such as the Astors, the Churchills and the Devonshires as they hosted hunting parties and balls that attracted the likes of Charlie Chaplin, T.E. Lawrence, and royals such as Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson. We waltz through aristocratic soirées, and watch as the upper crust struggle to fend off rising taxes and underbred outsiders, property speculators and poultry farmers. We gain insight into the guilt and the gingerbread, and see how the image of the country house was carefully protected by its occupants above and below stairs. Through the glitz of estate parties, the social tensions between old money and new, the hunting parties, illicit trysts, and grand feasts, Tinniswood offers a glimpse behind the veil of these great estates and reveals a reality much more riveting than the dream.

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Customer Reviews

This book has great promise and a couple worthwhile chapters including an opening piece on the actual weekends promised by the title and a closing chapter on the servants lives, but between there is much tedium. Chapter after chapter of how Lord Sumblebum hired some known society decorator to do up Moldy Manor. And that this was all covered in *Country Life*. We're supposed to care but with nary a picture to support most of them we're just left confused. How useful is a description of a Manor house with "high gables and ivy" with not so much as a single picture. In particular the chapter on the handful of modern country houses just left me screaming "show me". A couple random pictures didn't do the job. Descriptions of lavish dinners and receptions were similarly crying out for anything to bring the text to life. Certainly well researched but would be much more interesting with half the text and dozens of additional illustrations.

The English country house occupies a special place in our collective imaginations. Landscapes of sweeping lawns, ornamental waters, and long rows of trees draw the eye to magnificent mansions occupied by wealthy, often titled, personages and their servants. It's an image that has been reinforced by countless novels, murder mysteries, movies, and television series like *Brideshead Revisited* and *Downton Abbey*. Adrian Tinniswood has produced a fascinating history of the last years in which the country house stereotype was still fairly accurate. It is a history of a vanished world whose memory remains strong. England's landed estates had been a continuing source of wealth and political power for centuries, but by the early twentieth century a few strains had begun to show here and there. Increased taxation and the growth of industry began to put some limits on landowners' political and economic power. Those limits were intensified by World War I, when many ancient families lost sons who had been counted on to carry on the name and inherit the property. These families began to sell off their mansions and break up their estates. The new owners, many of whom were recently wealthy, renovated and sometimes reconstructed their properties, making use of architects and interior designers who became famous (or sometimes infamous) for their modifications. Despite these changes the country houses remained centers of social life for their communities. Their owners hosted artists, musicians, and film stars, and many mansions continued to be known for the political and economic power of those who frequented them. Tinniswood's 17 chapters are filled with stories about the mansions, their owners and servants who lived in them, the architects and designers who modified them, and the influence they wielded. He has a sharp eye for a telling anecdote and is particularly clever at delivering the occasional sardonic aside: when he describes the "record bag with a single shot" the 9th Duke of Devonshire scored when he fired at

and killed a wounded pheasant and the retriever that was chasing it, as well as injuring the retriever's owner and his own chef, Tinniswood pauses to reflect "My, how everyone must have laughed." Readers will find stories about such well known residences as Chequers and Chartwell as well as more obscure places like Castle Drogo. There are stories about many people who are still famous today, like Churchill, Lady Astor, and the sons and daughter of King George V; and also of some who are almost forgotten, like Sir Philip Sassoon and Claude Lowther. I particularly enjoyed reading about the different architects like Philip Tilden and Sir Edwin Lutyens, and it was interesting to read about the servants who had to keep the mansions running. Life in these English country houses must have been splendid but uncomfortable much of the time, regardless of how "modernized" they had been, and it's not difficult to understand why so many of them ended up being torn down or donated to the National Trust. Adrian Tinniswood's chronicle does a fine job of evoking a world which has, for better or worse, vanished forever.

"The Long Weekend" is a look at English country houses during the 1918-1939 period. The focus seemed to be the fate of the country house: who was selling, buying, renovating, redecorating, or building them. The author gave specific details about changes made to certain houses (including royal country houses) and the careers of certain architects or interior decorators. He included some general information about why it was difficult to sell old country houses, why people were selling them, various building or decorating trends, alternative uses found for country houses, and such. A few chapters covered what a country house party was generally like, the various jobs of the servants, the role that some country houses played in politics, notable fancy dress balls, and various sports done at country houses (with some details about bird hunting). He also talked about Americans who bought English country houses. I think I would have enjoyed the details about the decorations and changes if there had been more pictures of what the houses looked like before and afterward. As it was, I felt like I had details without the context to make it interesting. I'd also expected this to be more about the activities done at these houses, especially on the weekends. Instead, the book felt like a patchwork of information about country houses. The book was interesting, but I think it'd appeal most to those interested in architecture, interior decoration, and the people who owned these houses. I received an ebook review copy of this book from the publisher through NetGalley.

The Long Weekend is an insider's view of the peerage, particularly the landed class, and the role of the manor home within this societal structure. The book is not just about the long weekend from

Saturday to Monday enjoyed by society's best at all the famous homes around England. Although the author does give us a detailed view of what such a weekend looked like and meant, I rather think the value of the book is in the great detail devoted to the castles and manor homes and how their destiny was changed by the marriages, births and deaths that defined the families which possessed them.

Entertaining, gossipy guide to the final years of the English country house. The number of houses cited in England, Wales and Scotland is amazing. Not too many pictures and most in black and white. Still, there is Google to check if a particular house or area takes your fancy. I have travelled widely in Glos. And was surprised to discover several houses I had never heard of. This would be a great resource in planning a theme trip to Britain. The anecdotes about the owners of the houses are a real treat. If you are fascinated by the interwar years in England, you will enjoy this book.

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